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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000371

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: FORUM PR CHAIR ON CAMPAIGN STRATEGY AND TIGRAY
REGION

Classified By: DCM Tulinabo Mushingi for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) Summary: Ethnic Tigrayan and opposition coalition "Forum" leader Gebru Asrat told Poloffs the Forum is taking its campaign message directly to the people to obviate distortion of that message through state run media. Gebru described the Forum's political platform as advancing freedom, promoting liberal democracy versus revolutionary democracy, creating an independent economy, and improving the quality of education. Gebru also reported instances of harassment directed toward electoral candidates, some of whom have resigned. Gebru said he complained to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), with no results. Arena Tigray members are working to advance the Forum's political agenda under difficult circumstances, but are determined to make a mark in the political arena. Even if Arena Tigray or Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) were to win one national level seat in Tigray, which is the traditional stronghold of the TPLF, it would be a tremendous upset for the ruling party. End Summary.

2. (C) Poloffs met on 4 February with Gebru Asrat, a member of the Arena Tigray opposition party and former President of Tigray Region, to discuss the political strategy and progress in candidate registration of Arena Tigray and the Forum. Arena Tigray is a member of the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum (Forum) and Gebru is the Forum's Public Relations Chairperson.

Persistence in the Face of Difficult Political Environment

3. (C) Gebru told Poloffs the Forum does not expect free and fair elections, but decided to continue to run in the national elections. Gebru said it was time for Arena Tigray as part of the Forum to establish itself in the Tigray Region. Despite narrowing political space and inadequate funding, the Forum is finding ways to disseminate its message. According to Gebru, the party is meeting with its supporters face to face to ensure the party's message is received properly.

4. (C) Gebru told Poloffs that opposition parties do not have adequate airtime in the State-run media and said he had "no trust in the Ethiopian media." Gebru said he believed holding meetings, distributing publications, and utilizing independent media was the best way to spread the Forum's political message. The Forum has already distributed roughly

10,000 pamphlets containing the Forum political Manifesto in Tigrinia language in Tigray region. Gebru said the party often relies on the sympathy of printers who will donate print runs free of charge.

Campaign Finance and Fundraising Efforts

15. (C) Gebru told Poloffs the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) informed Arena Tigray by letter on February 2 of its ten percent allotment of campaign finance funds totaling 8,000 ETB (USD 588). Each opposition party making up the Forum will be entitled to a similar ten percent share of campaign funding, plus potential additional amounts based on the number of seats they have in Parliament and the number of female candidates they field. Gebru explained that because Arena Tigray is a two year-old party, it does not have seats in Parliament, and has not yet recruited a significant number of female candidates, so it does not expect additional financing from the NEBE. According to Gebru, a small diaspora in the United States and in Europe provides the Forum member parties with "thousands of dollars" to use in the campaign. He did not specify an exact amount. Gebru told Poloffs that Arena Tigray has diaspora support in Virginia, Washington, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Illinois as well as in Norway. Arena Tigray is developing a website in Chicago to introduce the party to the diaspora community there. He added that Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), also a Forum member, has the greatest number of diaspora chapters with a total of 17, and by implication, the greatest ability to raise funds from the diaspora. Gebru said the

ADDIS ABAB 00000371 002 OF 002

Forum plans to fundraise together overseas as well as domestically before the elections but hasn't yet done so. The Forum has already printed donation cards in denominations of 10, 50 and 100 ETB for the joint Forum domestic fundraising effort.

Forum Policy Objectives

16. (C) Gebru told Poloffs the Forum's political campaign includes promoting the necessity of freedom, which would allow people the choice of party membership, as well as liberal democracy, which would allow equal opportunity for all party members to participate freely in politics. The party also advocates for an economy that is not solely controlled by the state and is focused on improving the unemployment rate, reducing inflation, mitigating the consequences of droughts, and focusing on urban development. The Forum's political agenda also seeks to improve the quality of education by removing political activities from schools.

Arena Tigray Registers Forum Candidates in EPRDF "Home Turf"

17. (C) According to Gebru, Arena Tigray and UDJ are the only two Forum parties that will field candidates for the Forum in Tigray region. The two parties are allotted a total of 190 candidate spots, 152 for regional parliament and 38 for the national parliament. Gebru told Poloffs that so far Arena Tigray has filled 33 candidate spots for the national parliament and 82 for the regional parliament, while the UDJ has filled one candidate spot for the national parliament and two for the regional parliament. The Arena Tigray candidates are responsible for arranging meetings and for passing out publications on behalf of the Forum in the local Tigray woredas. Gebru is registered as a candidate for the national parliament in Mekele woreda.

Reported Harassment of Electoral Candidates in Tigray

18. (C) Gebru reported harassment of the Forum's Arena Tigray electoral candidates in the Tigray Region. Federal police allegedly stopped four candidates in Tekeze woreda and told them "not to run" in the elections and confiscated and burned their identification cards, rendering their chance to register null. The four candidates resigned. In Axum in central Tigray, Gebru said that federal police went to the house of a female candidate named Worknesh, who then resigned after they harassed her. Gebru also recounted that federal police visited a Muslim candidate at his home in Humera zone, which is in Northern Ethiopia on the border with Eastern Sudan, and confiscated his identification card. The candidate resigned from running in the elections. Gebru said he complained to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), with no results. When asked if he registered his complaints with the Joint Council of Political Parties established by the Electoral Code of Conduct, Gebru said he was not aware of joint councils on the regional level and did not report the instances to the Joint Council in Addis Ababa. Gebru told Poloffs that Arena Tigray members, however, have not encountered problems with voter registration and the party is pushing its constituency to register to vote.

19. (C) Comment: Arena Tigray members are working to advance the Forum's political agenda under difficult circumstances. Although Gebru appeared discouraged by the narrowing political space and alleged harassment of electoral candidates, he seemed determined to make a mark in the political arena. Even if Arena Tigray or UDJ were to win one national level seat in Tigray, which is the traditional stronghold of the TPLF, it would be a tremendous upset for the ruling party. Gebru told Poloffs he did not want to focus on the reported harassment, but instead wanted to focus on the Forum's political strategy and policy objectives. Gebru recounted his days as a fighter against the Derg and told Poloffs that "if there is a will among the people, the people will support you."

YATES